

Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Building Community in and through
Language and English

Curriculum connections

- Inclusion
- Perspectives
- Listening and speaking skills
- Identity texts
- Textual lineages

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What it is

Building a safe and caring classroom community is a cornerstone to effective teaching and learning because students need to feel safe and cared for to optimize the conditions for learning and to build social and emotional connections with others. A literacy-rich classroom community is one where all voices are included, all learners feel a sense of safety, and they are empowered to share their gifts, ideas, thoughts, wisdom, knowledge, feelings, and emotions. When students feel confident that they can be themselves in this shared space, they are more likely to take ownership of their social, emotional and academic learning. At the same time, when a strong community is established, learners tend to be able to relate to others' perspectives and points of view more readily (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). A classroom community creates a space for students to share their unique identities, with the confidence and dignity that they will be accepted by their peers. It is through intentional community building activities, purposeful text selections, and consistent classroom routines that enable an equitable, diverse, and inclusive community of literacy learners to flourish.

Although building classroom communities is key in any content area, the Ontario Language, Grades 1-8 and English Grade 9 curriculum offers educators important opportunities to build community through the following curriculum concepts, knowledge and skills (with the specific expectation codes noted in parentheses):

- ⇒ Learning about receptive and expressive communication (A1.1)
- ⇒ Empowering student agency and engagement (A.1.2)
- ⇒ Discussing digital citizenship (A2.1), online safety, well-being and etiquette (A2.2)
- ⇒ Fostering community and cultural awareness (A2.7)

- ⇒ Communicating in a safe, respectful, responsible, and inclusive manner (A2.7)
- ⇒ Acknowledging the contributions, lived experiences, and perspectives of individuals and communities (A3.2)
- ⇒ Recognizing the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit perspectives and ways of knowing as wisdom to learn from (A3.3) (C1.7)
- ⇒ Practicing effective listening skills (B1.1) (B1.2)
- ⇒ Experiencing speaking in formal and informal contexts (B1.3)
- ⇒ Noticing the point of view of others (C1.6)
- ⇒ Making connections to self, to text, and to the world (C2.5)
- ⇒ Reflecting on personal learning and growth (C2.7)
- ⇒ Allowing students' personal voices (D2.3)
- ⇒ Presenting ideas and artifacts that students have created (D3.2)

Furthermore, there are a number of curriculum expectations in Language and English that connect specifically with key concepts and principles related to building classroom community. For example,

- ⇒ understanding others' lived experiences and perspectives (A3.2)
- ⇒ understanding the relationships, ways of knowing, being and doing through themes explored in First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures (A3.3)
- ⇒ apply listening, speaking, and non-verbal communication skills and strategies to understand and communicate (B1.1, B1.2, B1.3)



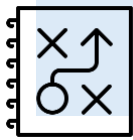
Why it matters

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) writes, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (p. 11). It is this idea of connection between the teacher(s), the student(s) and the content that lends itself to the importance of interconnectedness within classroom communities and the acquisition of language, literacy, and English.

The reason why connection matters within a literacy classroom is because learning does not happen in isolation of each other. This means that there needs to be harmony throughout the shared space so that each individual can grow. Indigenous creator, Richard Wagamese writes, “ALL my relations. That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass, and creature. We live because everything else does” (2016). In a community, we learn because everyone else does.



Knowing our learners is an essential component of authentic connections. It is axiomatic that, as a teacher, the more information about students that I have, the more I can help them” (Kumabe, 2018, p. 128)



How it works

Intentional community building activities

First, establish an assets-based approach to teaching and learning, where knowing students' strengths and interests are at the forefront of fostering an inclusive community. This also means, moving away from deficit thinking where the focus is students' lack and needs. An activity for getting to know students better is to have each of them create an identity map (Kleinrock, 2021). This map might include a picture of the student and characteristics that they want to share about themselves, such as age, race, gender, languages, religion, culture, and their favourite things.

Then, as students begin to know themselves and each other better, a safe space for these identities to flourish needs to be continuously established. To do this, a daily practice of gathering as a community is required. For example, using a community circle offers students opportunities to listen to others (skill), to share their own points of view (skill, concept/knowledge), and to understand other people's positions, perspectives, and ideas (concepts/knowledge).

The Anishinaabe peoples believe in seven teachings for how individuals should treat each other (Bell, 2019). These guiding principles might serve as the foundational community agreements for your classroom culture. They are: love, honesty, respect, truth, bravery, wisdom and humility (Bell, 2019). As an activity, students can investigate the meaning of these vocabulary words to then co-construct an anchor chart for a community circle.

Purposeful text selections

When educators are choosing the texts that they want to use for instruction and/or make available within their classroom library, it is suggested that they keep in mind that, “Texts should drive cognitive goals (**skills and intellect**) as well as critical analysis (**criticality**) and sociocultural goals (**identity**)” (Muhammad, 2020).

Muhammad suggests *layering texts*, which is when multimodal print and/or non-print texts accompany each other to help substantiate a deeper understanding of knowledge (2020). Layering texts can look like providing students with a chosen mentor text, and then pairing it with companion texts that follow a similar topic and/or theme. This could be an intentional author study, where all the books from a particular author are gathered with a determined purpose and introduced in an explicit way. These books are layered like one might layer warm clothing on a cold day.

Muhammad shares Alfred Tatum’s (2009) idea of *textual lineages*. “Textual lineages are texts that are meaningful and significant in our lives” (Muhammad, 2020). A suggested activity for the start of a school year is to write out a mind map of your textual lineages, and then add to this mind map as the year goes on. On the mind maps, students write the texts that are meaningful and significant to them. This might include texts that they listen to, view, and/or read, such as, movies, videos, literature, social media, artwork, music, and websites.

Fostering belonging through routines and procedures

As with all teaching, a gradual release of responsibility is required to move students from novice to mastery or from modeled to independent. Archer and Hughes (2011) offer an explicit structure for how to effectively and efficiently teach students literacy (Kemeny, 2023). This structure is “**I Do, We Do, You Do.**” I Do is the teacher modeling the skill, We Do is the guided practice of the skill, and You

Do is the independent application of the skill (Kemeny, 2023). This structure could be used to teach the skills necessary for successful community circles, but also the community circles can be the safe space to successfully model and guide literacy learning. This interconnection between literacy and community allows simpler concepts to be taught, practiced, and applied in safe space.

Within these routines, high expectations are set for all and each person takes responsibility for their own words and actions. This is necessary for the routines to establish kindness, empathy, inclusion and belonging through a culture of dignity.



*ALL my relations. That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass, and creature. We live because everything else does. If we were to choose collectively to live that teaching, the energy of our change of consciousness would heal each of us—and heal the planet”
(Wagamese, p. 36)*

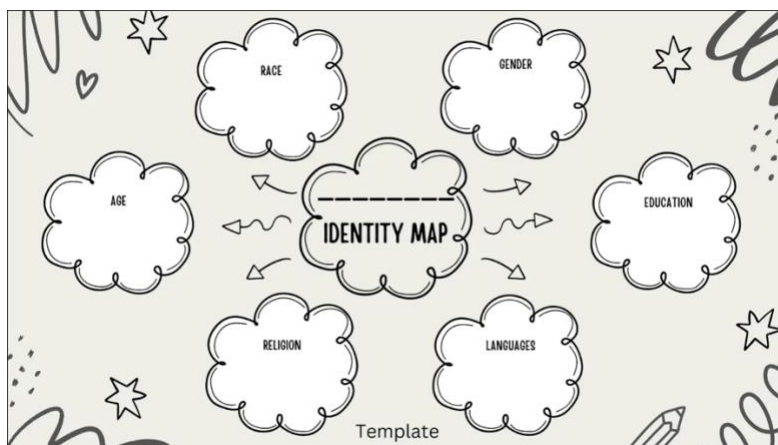
Resources

[Identity map resources \(Google drive\)](#)

The following identity map resources include digital text for those who prefer digital access and printable examples and templates for learners that prefer paper format access.

[name]'s Identity map

- ⇒ Age
- ⇒ Race
- ⇒ Gender
- ⇒ Education
- ⇒ Languages
- ⇒ Religions



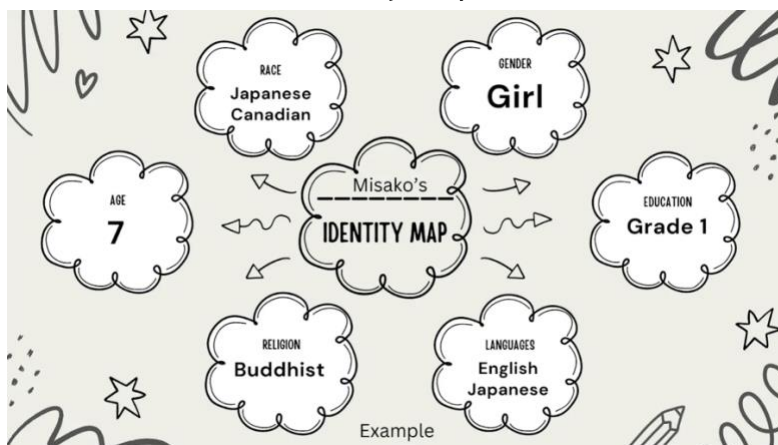
[Sample Identity Map 1 \(Google drive\)](#)

Misako's Identity map

- ⇒ Age: 7

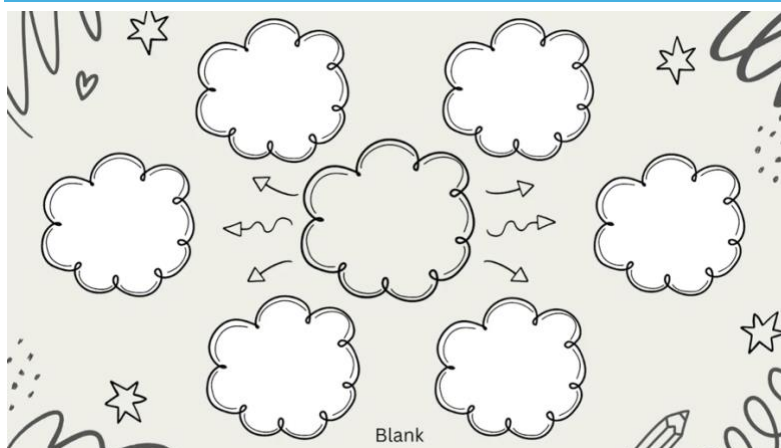
- ⇒ **Race:** Japanese Canadian
- ⇒ **Gender:** Girl
- ⇒ **Education:** Grade 1
- ⇒ **Languages:** English, Japanese
- ⇒ **Religion:** Buddhist

Identity map template. Six clouds with six prompt words surround a cloud with the title identity map.



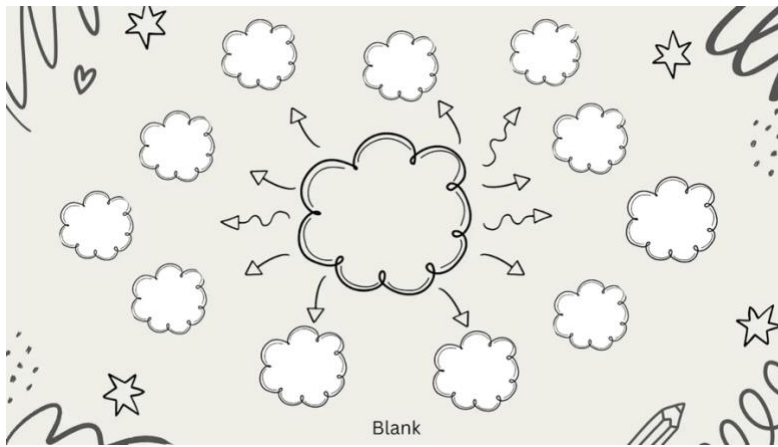
[Sample Identity Map 2 \(Google drive\)](#)

Identity map template: six sections



[Identity Map Template 1 \(Google drive\)](#)

Identity map template: eleven sections



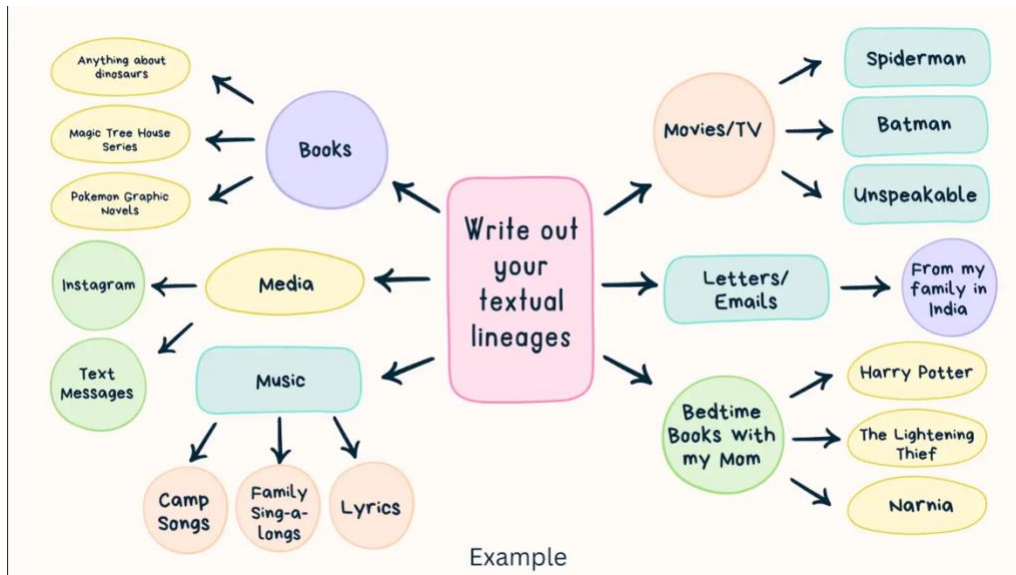
[Identity Map Template 2 \(Google drive\)](#)

Text lineages resources (Google drive)

The following text lineage resources include digital text for those who prefer digital access and printable examples and templates for learners that prefer paper format access.

Write out your textual lineages (example)

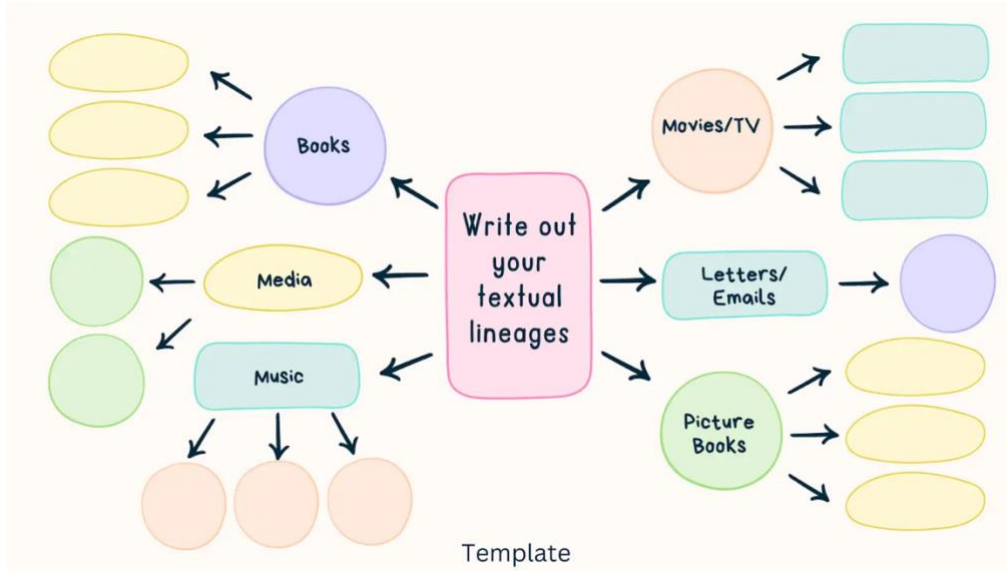
- ⇒ Books
 - anything about dinosaurs
 - Magic Tree House Series
 - Pokemon Graphic Novels
- ⇒ Media
 - Instagram
 - Text Messages
- ⇒ Music
 - Camp Songs
 - Family Sing-a-longs
 - Lyrics
- ⇒ Movies / TV
 - Spiderman
 - Batman
 - Unspeakable
- ⇒ Letters ? Emails
 - From my family in India
- ⇒ Bedtime books with my Mom
 - Harry Potter
 - The Lightning Thief
 - Narnia



[Sample Text Lineages 1 \(Google drive\)](#)

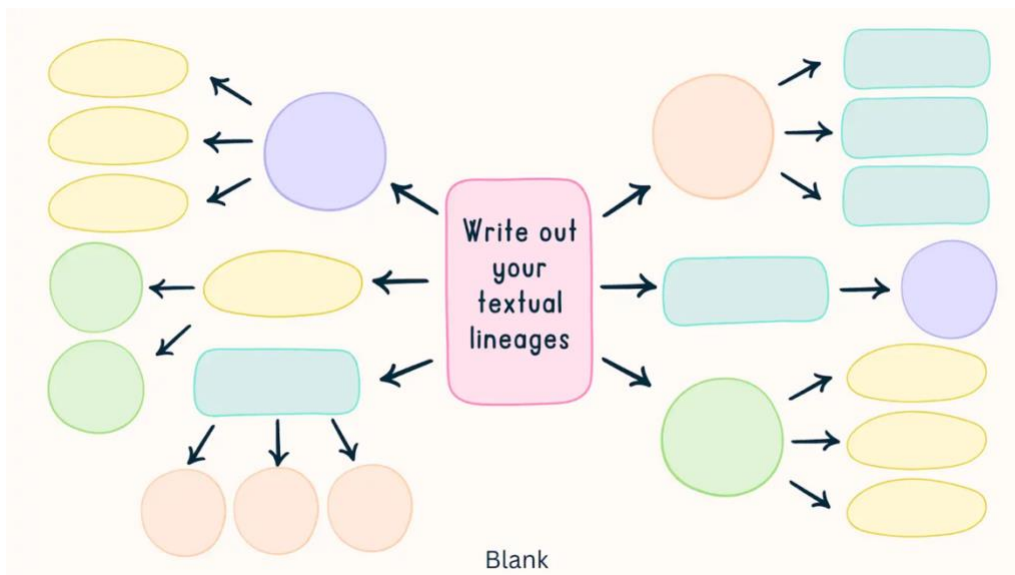
Write out your textual lineages (template)

- ⇒ Books
- ⇒ Media
- ⇒ Music
- ⇒ Movies / TV
- ⇒ Letters / Emails
- ⇒ Picture Books



[Text Lineages Template 1 \(Google drive\)](#)

Write out your textual lineages (blank)



[Text Lineages Template 2 \(Google drive\)](#)

References

- Bell, Nicole. (2019). *Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin: Living spiritually with respect, relationship, reciprocity and responsibility*. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-25016-4_5.
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- Muhammad, G., & Love, B. L. (2020). *Cultivating genius: an equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. New York, NY, Scholastic Inc.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Learning for all: A guide to effective assessment and instruction for all students, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Toronto: Author.
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Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of the teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.




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Updates

When updates are made to this document, they are tracked below with date and description of update.

- February 2025: initial release